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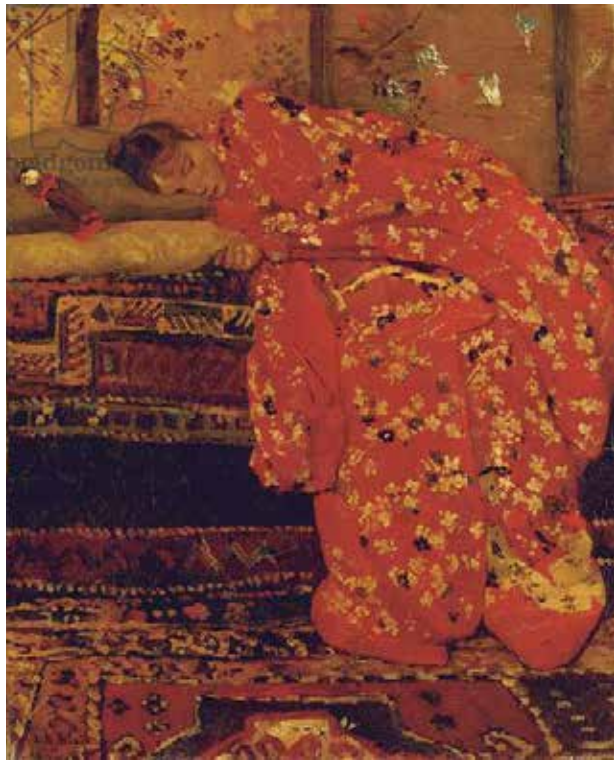
## Picturing Kimono in Britain, Europe and America

*Elizabeth Kramer*

The invaluable contribution of Japanese art and design to the development of modern painting in Britain, Europe and America has been widely acknowledged. Histories of art have predominantly focused on how Japanese prints served as a catalyst in the development of modernism, particularly with regard to the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Movements.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is important to remember that, following the opening up of Japan to the wider world, the country's lacquerware, ceramics, metalwork, enamels, textiles and dress also captured the critical attention and imagination of designers, artists and collectors. Despite their frequent pictorial representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Japanese kimono are rarely discussed in relation to either their formal influence on, or significance in, paintings. Nor is much consideration given to what these works reveal about the women who chose to wear these garments.

Following the enthusiastic response to the Japan Court at the 1862 London International Exhibition, the interest expressed in Japanese art, including kimono, manifested itself in painting. This can be seen, for example, in *Caprice in Purple and Gold, No. 2: The Golden Screen*, painted in 1864 by the American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Here a woman, draped in two layers of kimono, gazes at Japanese prints surrounded by other Asian objects (KIM142). Anne Kortelainen asserts that the art historical cannon 'distinguishes those artists and designers who saw no more in Japanese art than a pretty decoration from those who saw and understood the true depth of Japanese art and radical formal approaches it offered to Western artists and designers'.<sup>2</sup> Such a distinction is not easily drawn, however, and demonstrates an elitist bias that devalues genre painting. Such a viewpoint is also problematic as not only does it ignore the fact that many painters had a broad interest in Japanese art and design, but it also deters proper consideration of the meaning of the objects depicted, including kimono. Japanese *objets d'art* might be seen as mere exotic props in *Caprice in Purple and Gold* but, as the title indicates, they served as stylistic conduits that enabled artist and viewer to contemplate the beautiful. In a letter that Whistler wrote to fellow artist Henri Fantin-Latour (1836–1904) in 1868, he addressed the subject of colour in painting and confirmed the inspiration of Japanese textiles: 'the colours should be so to speak *embroidered* on – in other words the same colour reappearing continually here and there like the same thread in an embroidery ... the whole forming in this way a harmonious *pattern* – Look how the Japanese understand this!'<sup>3</sup>

The Dutch painter George Hendrik Breitner (1857–1923) had a profound interest in the pictorial potential offered by kimono. Between 1893 and 1896 he executed a series of 13 works of the young model Geesje Kwak, in either red or white kimono (KIM144). All the works demonstrate Breitner's fascination for the way in which the garment folds and drapes, and the possibilities it offers for the rendering of colour and tone. Suzanne Veldink has noted that the model for this series differs quite markedly from the darker, larger women from the Jordaan, a district in Amsterdam that housed immigrants and migrants, that Breitner typically



KIM145  
**PORTRAIT OF MRS GEORGE SMITH**  
 Frederick William Burton  
 (1816–1900)  
 Watercolour on paper  
 London, 1873  
 Private Collection

probably the artist who supplied the kimono depicted in many of these paintings, a closer look at the consumption of, and the discourse around, these garments demonstrates that they were widely worn by women to express fashionability and good taste.

Elizabeth Blakeway, wife of eminent publisher George Murray Smith, selected the embroidered and dyed kimono she wore for her portrait from her own wardrobe (KIM145). The garment is depicted in exquisite detail by Frederick William Burton (1816–1900) and the Irish artist was highly praised by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) when the work was shown at the first exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery, London, in 1877.<sup>8</sup> The painting illustrates the type of kimono women were able to acquire in the 1870s and the way in which they were worn. Like many examples, it is of a kind originally made for women of the samurai class to wear on highly

painted.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Kwak’s slender and delicate beauty aligned more closely with the stereotypical image of Japanese femininity, as perceived through woodblock prints of courtesans and geisha.

Painters vied with each other in collecting and surrounding themselves with Japanese objects, as their paintings, together with descriptions and photographs of their studios and homes, testify. In 1864 the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882) visited Madame de Soye’s in Paris, which specialized in Japanese goods, only to discover to his disappointment that the French painter James Tissot (1836–1902) had already purchased all the kimono on sale.<sup>5</sup> Shops such as Madame de Soye’s, or Liberty’s in London, provided not only places to acquire Japanese objects but also important sites for interaction between artists. In addition they attracted middle-class women shoppers, keen to express their taste through their purchases (ch.11). In Britain the Aesthetic Movement proposed that art should be equated with the beautiful, rather than deliver a moralizing or didactic lesson, and as such could be extended to household objects—from a couch to a teapot to a peacock feather—as well as to dress. Domestic advice stressed the importance of a woman’s individual and creative decisions in selecting her dress and composing the interior decoration of her home, as these choices reflected her cultural discrimination and that of her family. In her discussion of femininity and its representation in Aesthetic paintings, Kathy Alexis Psomiades states, ‘If beauty is an art like painting and sculpture and music, then it is both a mode of self-expression and a performance aimed at a larger audience.’<sup>6</sup> This sense of active performance is important to bear in mind when contemplating the image of kimono-clad women in paintings, even when frequently languid poses belie the effort expended on decorating home and self.<sup>7</sup> While it was

KIM142  
**CAPRICE IN PURPLE AND GOLD, NO. 2: THE GOLDEN SCREEN**  
 James McNeill Whistler  
 (1834–1903)  
 Oil on canvas  
 London, 1864  
 Freer Gallery of Art,  
 Washington, D.C. Gift  
 of Charles Lang Freer,  
 F1904.75a

KIM144  
**THE RED KIMONO**  
 George Hendrik Breitner  
 (1857–1923)  
 Oil on canvas  
 The Netherlands, \*\*  
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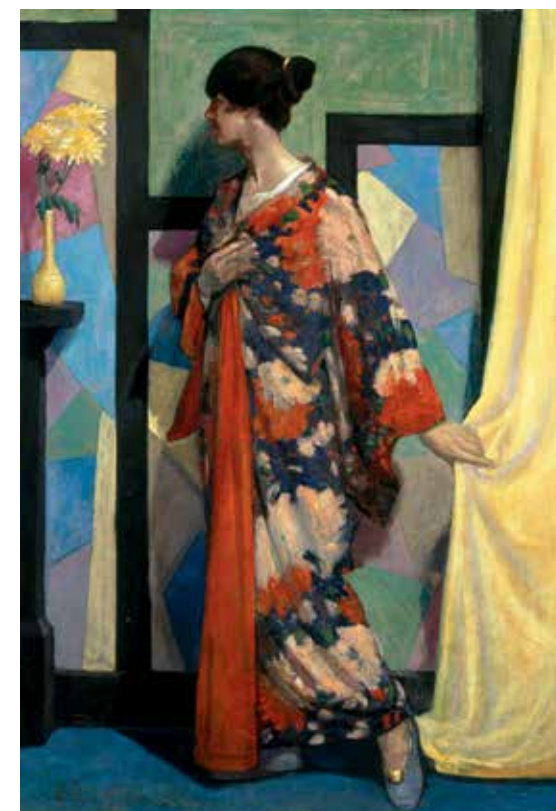




KIM146  
**KIMONO FOR A WOMAN  
 (KOSODE)**  
 Ramie (*asa*), freehand paste-  
 resist dyeing (*yūzen*), stencil  
 imitation tie-dyeing (*surihita*)  
 and embroidery in silk and  
 metallic threads  
 Kyoto, 1800–50  
 Private Collection

KIM147  
**A COMFORTABLE CORNER  
 (THE BLUE KIMONO)**  
 William Merritt Chase  
 (1849–1916)  
 Oil on canvas  
 New York, about 1888  
 Parrish Museum, Littlejohn  
 Collection, 1961.5.21

KIM148  
**KIMONO STUDY**  
 William McCance  
 (1894–1970)  
 Oil on canvas  
 Probably Glasgow, 1919  
 Edinburgh City Art Centre



formal occasions, revealing how many of these garments made their way to Britain, Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century (KIM001, KIM016, KIM142, KIM144). As can be seen in the portrait, Blakeway has added small buttons to enable her to secure the garment more easily. Rather remarkably this kimono survives, although minus the buttons (KIM146).

In contrast to the rather wistful expressions of the kimono-clad women depicted by Breitner and Burton, the commanding gaze of the sitter in *A Comfortable Corner (The Blue Kimono)* by William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) confronts the viewer (KIM147). The woman wears a kimono over a white petticoat and black stockings and is holding a fan, while other Japanese objects, including a golden screen, large bronze vessel and cushions covered in embroidered textiles, further articulate the aesthetic space. Chase amassed a large art collection and many Japanese objects can be seen in his paintings. Yet these are more than mere ‘pretty props’. As Erica Hirshler has argued, Chase drew on seventeenth-century Northern European paintings of interiors and women in the creation of a dynamic new genre: ‘With a cloak of tradition, Chase vested his new women with power, reinforcing their vivid engagement with the world.’<sup>9</sup> Chase cultivated several personal and professional relationships with these ‘new women’. The sitter here looks a little like the artist’s wife, Alice Gerson Chase, who, raised in an artistic household, shared her husband’s interests, which they actively developed in their children. Chase often depicted her in his work, where ‘Alice is simultaneously shown in the diverse roles that relate to her own life and to the contemporary dialogue about women’s proper place; she is both inside and outside, passive and active, a connoisseur and a mother.’<sup>10</sup> He also painted his former student, life-long friend and occasional artistic collaborator Dora Wheeler (1856–1940) in a similar, self-assured pose.<sup>11</sup> The identity of the woman in the blue kimono is unclear, yet her posture and the way in which she wears her Japanese garment is suggestive of the modern, independent and fashionable women whose talents and companionship Chase valued.

While the fine embroidered details of the kimono seemed of particular interest to Aesthetic painters, in the early twentieth century it was the bold patterns of contemporary kimono that allowed artists to work towards greater abstraction. This is dramatically demonstrated in *Kimono Study* by Scottish painter William McCance (1894–1970), which depicts his wife, the artist Agnes Miller Park (1895–1980) (KIM148). McCance enthusiastically embraced European modernist movements such as Cubism and Futurism, as can be seen in this work in which Miller Park, in full-length profile, wears a brightly decorated kimono in front of geometric shapes and flat colours enclosed in a black frame. Thus the kimono continued to serve as far more than a decorative prop; it inspired personal artistic style and embodied specific meaning for both painter and sitter.